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ABSTRACT

The practice of interviewing individuals rather than groups has been based largely upon methodological concerns for preventing contamination of data. The assumptions that (1) the data provided by individuals can, in aggregate, yield social truth; (2) individuals are conscious of social phenomena; and (3) the whole of social reality is equal to the sum of its parts all bear critical examination. The prevailing assumptions about the source of social knowledge, the nature of knowledge itself, and appropriate research methods have been shaped by the philosophy of individualism. Groups are frequently the only appropriate source of social knowledge. Because the results of group interviews are interactive, they will produce meanings that are social products and that probably will be quite different from the prior, socially untested perceptions of any single individual. Group interviews allow the researcher to observe the ways in which interview participants stimulate each other and provide clues to the language, terms, and codes that participants share. Case studies of a program evaluation, a peer group self-analysis, and an assessment of women's perceptions of barriers in job training programs for nontraditional occupations illustrate the role of the group interview in participatory research groups and Freirean study circles where the group factor is significant in and of itself. (MN)

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GROUP INTERVIEWS: A SOCIAL METHODOLOGY FOR SOCIAL INQUIRY

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> **The interview is more than tool to object of study. It is the art of sociological sociability, the game which we play for the pleasure of savoring its subtleties. It is our flirtation with life, our eternal affair, played hard and to win, but played with that detachment and amusement which gave us, win or lose, the spirit to rise up and interview again and again.**
>
> **Mark Benny and Everett Hughes[1]**

The interview is an invention of mass media. Mayhew, a reporter for a London newspaper, was the first pollster to propose as social fact conclusions drawn from the aggregated responses of "some thousands of the humbler classes of society." From its journalistic beginning a little over a century ago, the interview has become one of the principle research tools for social inquiry, exceeded in instance of use only by its more formal offspring, the questionnaire.

The dominant practice of interviewing individuals, rather than groups, has been based largely on methodological concern for preventing the contamination of data. Seemingly unquestioned by researchers has been a dominant assumption that data provided by individuals can, in aggregate, yield social truth; that individuals are conscious of social phenomena; and that the whole of social reality is equal to the sum of its parts. These assumptions bear critical examination.

Social Knowledge and the Individual

Our search for social knowledge is channeled by assumptions about 1) the source of such knowledge, 2) the nature of knowledge itself, and 3) appro-

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priate methods for research. For most of us, these assumptions have been shaped by a philosophy of individualism. The origins of individualism in American thought are complex, but deeply rooted in the development of capitalism, free enterprise, and liberal democracy. As James Bryce observed in 1888, "individualism, the love of enterprise, and pride in personal freedom, have been deemed by Americans not only their choicest, but their peculiar and exclusive possessions."[2] It is not our purpose to contend that 'individualist' assumptions are 'false'--rather, that they are assumptions, an unquestioned logic which we impose on the world when we raise questions and propose answers.

1. The Source of Knowledge

Most social knowledge, and knowledge about education in particular, is derived from individuals who are surveyed, tested, interviewed or by other means measured. The "truth of the matter" is derived largely from the aggregation of data provided by individuals. The individual in such research is pictured abstractly--constituted independently of his or her social context, with given interests, goals, and needs, and regarded as a product of nature, rather than history. On the other hand, schools, banks, governments, and universities are, as in the *Leviathan* of Thomas Hobbes,[3] merely a means of fulfilling the independent needs of individuals who construct and patronize these and myriad other social institutions.

The most penetrating critique of this conceptualization of the individual in society has been given by Marx who wrote:

> Man is in the most literal sense of the word a *zoon politikon*, not only a social animal, but an animal which can develop into an individual only in society. Production by isolated individuals outside of society--something which might happen as an exception to a civilized man who by accident got into the wilderness and already dynamically possessed within himself the forces of society--is as great an absurdity as the idea of the development of language without individuals living together and talking to one another.[4]

For Marx, interests, goals, and needs are never simply given. These "characteristics of the individual" are more likely the consequence of economic and political conditions than instruments for economic and political change. We shape our tools, thereafter our tools shape us. The needs before which knowledge is conjured, the research tools by which knowledge is fabricated, and the measures by which knowledge is validated and legitimized are social products, as Foucault and others have noted.[5] According to this view, all knowledge is social in both its origins and purpose. As a consequence, social groups, rather than individuals, are the appropriate focus for research and analysis.

As a source of knowledge, the group is not a new focus. Educators, such as Kurt Lewin, recognized the value of the group for planning learned change. His model, later called Training or T-Groups, uses the group as a source of knowledge.[6] Feedback regarding individuals' perceptions and behaviors offered by other group members provide a process through which growth and development are fostered. Here, as with social group work (therapeutic) and group counseling, the group is the source of knowledge.

The use of "Focus Groups" in the fields of marketing, training, and organizational development is a tool for quickly indentifying reactions to new products or processes.[7] Here, the goal is to efficiently identify perceptions and opinions in a social setting which provides peer reinforcement in simulation of more universal social processes.

In these examples, the group as source of knowledge identifies or creates meanings, perceptions and behaviors. In the case of Training Groups an additional goal is planned (manipulated) change. But for participatory researchers, radical adult educators, feminist educators, and others, the value of groups as a source of knowledge lies in the group's illumination of social phenomena and the impetus groups create for collective action as a consequence of new social meanings.

2. The Nature of Knowledge

A partial consequence of the dominant American focus on the individual-as-given is what Steven Lukes has called "epistemological individualism," a philosophical doctrine about the nature of knowledge which asserts that all knowledge is self-knowledge--reflection on one's own unique, individual existence, shaped by experience.[8] Decartes began from this position--that is, from the individual's certainty of his or her own existence: *cogito ergo sum*.[9] This Cartesian premise finds full expression in the empiricist's claim that knowledge derives from experience, arises within the individual mind and is based on individual sensations. According to this view, contingent truth (truth which is not logically necessary) must be based on and is reducible to data grounded in the experience of each individual. Research is, from such an atomistic perspective, a program of building the whole of knowledge from observing its discrete, elemental pieces.

Challenges to this position have come principally from those who point to the need for a shared, "intersubjective" language as a precondition of knowledge. Challenging the individualistic perspectives on meaning and knowledge, Blumer's theory of symbolic interaction posits that

> meaning arises out of a process of interaction between people. The meaning of a thing grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with respect to the thing... Meanings are social products.[10]

Human groups or societies exist in action. It is through action that meanings are interpreted. The activities of members of a society occur predominantly in response to or in relation to one another. Therefore, objects (be they artifacts or social phenomena) must be seen as social creations. They are formed in the process of definition and interpretation as this takes place through the interaction of people.

> The meaning of anything and everything has to be formed, learned, transmitted through a process of indication--a process that is necessarily a social process.[11]

The ability to "indicate" objects to one's self and others enables two kinds of human action to occur. First is the ability to indicate one's self as an object to one's self. This provides us with the capacity to understand ourselves more fully, both as individuals and as members of society. It also allows us to engage in "taking the role of the other" which is essential for effective communication. Second, it enables humans to enter into joint or collective action which is the outcome of the process of interpretative interaction between individuals.

Relating theory to practice, "the social construction of reality," is the assumption upon which the work of Paulo Freire, feminist educators, participatory researchers, and others is based. It is the collective creation of meaning--in study "circles" for Freire, in consciousness-raising groups for feminists--that leads to joint strategies for action. For social activists the identification of current and past social meanings does not suffice. These meanings must be accompanied by the creation of new meanings, and new meanings are most effectively identified and created through social interaction--that is, in groups.

3. Research Method

Methodological Individualism, a term first introduced by J.W.N. Watkins in 1955,[12] is a doctrine about explanation. It asserts that all explanations of social phenomena must be made in terms of facts about individuals. Its proponents in social science research include Max Weber ("sociology itself can only proceed from the actions of one or more separate individuals and must therefore adopt strictly individualistic methods"[13]), John Stuart Mill ("the laws of the phenomena of society are, and can be, nothing but...the laws of individual human nature"[14]), and Karl Popper ("the functioning of all social institutions should always be understood as resulting from the

decisions, actions, attitudes, etc. of human individuals"[15]). In Watkins words:

> Every complex social situation, institution or event is the result of a particular configuration of individuals, their dispositions, situations, beliefs, and physical resources and environment. There may be unfinished or half-way explanations of large-scale phenomena; but we shall not have arrived at rock-bottom explanations of such large-scale phenomena until we have deduced an account of them from statements about the dispositions, beliefs, resources and inter-relations of individuals.[16]

What does methodological individualism claim? The answer to this question varies, depending on the extent to which "society" and the "social context" have been "built into" our understanding of the individual. For example, statements about brain-states or the central nervous system generally assume no references to social groups or institutions. Such statements describe individual states of being without regard for economic status, political position, or social context. On the other hand, statements about learning habits or participation patterns presuppose and sometimes directly subsume propositions about social groups and institutions. Thus, there is a range of predicates or statements about individuals on a continuum from non-social to the most social. For example...

from Non-Social... ☐ Right-hemisphere/left hemisphere functions;
☐ Individual motivation, self-directedness in learning;
☐ Participation, subjugation to authority, popularity;
to Social... ☐ Correlation between an individual's schooling and later achievement.

Note that each of these examples can and have been used to explain social phenomena. For example, motivational research is frequently used to explain why "non-participants" persistently evade the broad net cast by adult education marketing specialists.

Critics of methodological individualism are quick to point out that predicates similar to the first two examples above (right-hemisphere... motivation) are neither plausible nor promising when used to explain social phenomena; explanations of the third type (e.g. participation) are partial and cannot account for the differences between institutions and societies; finally, statements exemplified by the fourth type are question-begging because they build crucial social factors into the allegedly explanatory individuals (as, in our example, by focusing on the individual in school and work place, while ignoring the effects of class, sex, etc. on school and work options).

When concerned with social phenomena, there are several questions which the researcher ought first to address when drawing social conclusions

from statements of or about individuals. To what extent are individuals repositories of knowledge about society and its institutions? Which individuals are knowledgeable? Under what conditions are statements by individuals concerning intentions, goals, needs, and opinions informed, reasoned, and accurate even as reflections of individual perception? And finally, might there not be a more appropriate source of social data, namely the social group itself?

The Social Construction of Reality

Groups are a valid, and frequently the only appropriate source for the identification and creation of social knowledge. For participatory researchers and Freirean and feminist educators, the conduct of group interviews requires that the traditional hierarchial separation of researcher and the researched be eliminated. The researcher becomes a full participant in the group. Theirs is a dialectic relationship, resulting in "intersubjectivity."[17] Here, the researcher listens attentively, questions, shares his or her own experiences, proposes tentative conclusions for the group's evaluation and suggestions, writes up the results in field notes, and occasionally returns to the group with these notes for final comment. If a researcher accepts the group as a source of social knowledge and values the social creation of meaning, then s/he must be willing to be a full participant in the process. S/he must be willing to respond, as well as question; follow a line of inquiry valued by the group, as well as propose questions central to the research question with which s/he began. Such a methodology emphasizes "people studying people" as an interactive process. This eliminates the unwarranted object/subject split between researcher and researched, as well as the exploitation of those researched as though they were objects.

The results of group interviews are obviously interactive, rather than linear. Instead of cumulative outcomes--as when responses are added together to demonstrate effect (R+R+R+R=significant outcome)--outcomes may be the creation of totally new meaning from the dynamic interweaving of responses and the social interrelationships among the respondents. In other words, the whole is greater than (or different from) the sum of its parts. The point is, group interviews cannot be validated by comparing their results with individual interviews with the same population. Rather, **groups will produce meanings which are social products and which may, and probably will, be quite different from the prior, socially-untested perceptions of any single individual.**

The value of group interviews is that they bring the researcher "into the world of subjects."[18] When reflecting together, participants will often stimulate each other. For example, in a study of women's perceptions

regarding barriers and facilitators of their learning in traditionally male vocational programs, one woman's comment that she would prefer an exclusively female program might lead other woman to consider the pros and cons of coed versus sex-exclusive programs. Group interviews also provide clues to the language, terms, and codes that participants share.[19] As groups develop they create their own language codes, just as they are creating their own meanings.[20] It is important and valuable to be able to understand the group language code as well as the group culture.[21] Particularly in studies where the group factor is in itself important (such as in participatory research groups and Freirean study circles) the group interview becomes a most appropriate research tool--as the following examples attest:

Case Study 1: Program Evaluation

An urban, community-based education center was concerned for its future and dissatisfied with previous evaluations based solely on enrollment, retention, and completion data. It sought to initiate a more qualitative self-study. Group interviews were proposed as a vehicle for evaluation which could easily be incorporated into its ongoing program. Interviews with groups of three to eight persons began addressing questions regarding assumptions and purposes of the program, pedagogical methods, governance, and perceived results. These groups included teachers, students, administrators, board and community members in varying proportions. The interviewer allowed opinions and tentative conclusions to take shape as they would in the program itself: that is, to emerge within the interaction of each group in search of consensus. The outcome of these discussions was not so much a picture of what was, as a picture of what ought to be in the minds of the discussants. In this way, evaluative research easily led to strategies for action. Numerous modifications and program changes were introduced during the initial six-month study. These changes were a direct consequence of the reality-altering impact of the research itself.

After the first few weeks of interviewing, the researcher began to put field notes in writing. He was guided by what Glaser and Strauss have termed the "constant comparison method."[22] Data was gathered into categories which appeared to incorporate a variety of facts. As major categories emerged, tested for their usefulness in further group discussions, theoretical notations about these categories were provisionally written down and used as probes to determine whether the categories had predictive value; that is, did incidents and data cluster about the chosen categories so that new data was no longer needed to support them? As modifications of the provisional categories became fewer, the remaining categories became saturated with data. Codifications were developed to explain the underlying

complexity of data, inconsistencies were exposed and accounted for, and theory emerged as the provisional integration of the remaining categories.

As each of these incremental stages was reached, the researcher went back, to sometimes the same, to sometimes different groups, to see whether what he had captured in the more formal discipline of writing reflected the group's perceptions. Frequently these repeated interviews generated entirely new areas of discourse, new data, and new categories; then the process would start again. Themes for discourse were increasingly generated by the discussants themselves who, as they gained confidence in themselves and in the practical consequences of their study, assumed a greater share of responsibility for analysis and conclusions. New themes converged not only within, but between groups, and became the principal theoretical constructs.

No attempt had been made to obtain a "representative sample" in gathering the groups. Rather, the emerging themes dictated the ongoing inclusion of new persons; these themes were constantly shared with dissimilar groups and occasionally with individuals and groups from other programs, and even from other cities, to test the extent to which consensual agreement could be obtained. In this manner the process of data collection was controlled by the emerging theory and by the expanding circles of participants in the study.

During six months of discourse and analysis, research became the collective effort of all who participated, not only as respondents and as primary sources of data, but more importantly, as collaborators in the articulation of questions, the determination of appropriate categories for codifying and communicating new understandings, and the evaluation of emerging themes and conclusions. The research methodology incorporated the political strategy of participatory research by achieving a reappropriation of the tools of research by those who seek to change, and not merely define their world.[23]

Case Study 2: Peer Group Self-Analysis

Research was needed to guide the development of curriculum for abused women at a community shelter. The request came from the frustration of staff whose total effort had, until then, focused on counseling individual women in crisis. Most women came to the shelter as their only alternative to repeated physical violence. The root causes of victimization remained unexplored because the immediate and critical work at hand--finding a job, housing, and schools--totally preoccupied both staff and the women they hoped to help.

The method chosen for research was the group interview. An initial group of sixteen women, most of whom had been recently victims of domestic violence, gathered around a tape recorder. Surprisingly, almost all spoke candidly of their experiences, fears, and self-hatred, their attitudes toward men and toward marriage. They spoke freely and without inhibitions, despite the fact that their conversations were being recorded. The tape recorder had not been turned on until everyone expressed readiness. Furthermore, anyone could shut the recorder off at any time. This "power" of the group over the process was tested once by a participant who "just wanted to see what would happen." Although the recorder was immediately turned on again, the action resulted in a marked reduction in tension among several of the women who had not entered into the conversation previously. Both the strength of the discourse and the control which the group exercised over the tape recorder increased the likelihood of the group's success.

The participants felt a sense of accomplishment after the first evening's discussion. The group interview had provided an excuse for and legitimized taking the time to reflect with one another. For most it had been their first peer group session and with it came the realization that their experiences were not unique. In fact, for the first time most of the women perceived and began to articulate the social and systemic factors leading to domestic violence and, with that perception, they began to stop blaming themselves. Positive feelings about the initial group meeting were intensified the following week when the same group gathered to "edit" the tape. Listening to their discourse a week later, the women were able to reflect on the previous week's meeting, hear and understand themselves, and discern some of the contradictions and unanswered questions which remained for future agendas. The process of selecting and rejecting statements not only brought closure to the previous meeting, but also defined tasks for the next. The women were enthusiastic about the research process and wanted to see it continue. Suggestions that "experts" be invited to present "real" research at future sessions were promptly dismissed. The participants valued the expertise represented by their own shared experience.

An early indication of the importance of the taping process was given at this first editing session. Several women who had not been at the session the previous week came to observe the editing. Their reaction was not "what an exciting tape!" but "when can <u>we</u> make a tape ourselves?" Their response demonstrated their perception of the value of the process over the content. As Paulo Freire has pointed out in relation to the oppressed generally, "what the oppressed need is not words, but a <u>voice</u>." A tape recorder, used interactively and with emphasis on the process rather than

the content (words), provided a group both with a voice and with a tool for critically reflecting on their lives. Through a group-controlled, interactive interviewing process, oppressed persons produced the knowledge needed to change the course of their future. This process, renewed with each successive group at the shelter, took the place of the curriculum the staff had hoped to produce.

Case Study 3: Women In Job Training

For seven years, an urban technical college had been offering women job training in fields usually dominated by men: welding, drafting, machine shop, air conditioning, building maintenance, and other non-traditional vocations. While the participation rate in these programs was always quite high, retention varied between 28% and 55%. In exit interviews, women gave many reasons for leaving: poor health, inadequate child care arrangements, obtaining a job and many others. But little was known about actual day-to-day activities within the program from the students perspective.

Based largely on findings of studies evaluating "classroom climate" for women in college, a research project was designed to gather women's perceptions of barriers to their learning in non-traditional vocational programs of the college. The programs were all non-credit. Three of the programs were exclusively female (except for a few teachers) and one program was co-ed with both male and female teachers. Methodology included both guided observations by the researcher and group interviews.

Thirteen classes were observed and nineteen students interviewed in groups. The size of the groups ranged from two to seven. In three of the programs, groups were entirely comprised of women who attended class on the day of the interview. In one of the programs only two out of eight women volunteered to participate. Because each program was observed several times (in order to include different teachers and courses), the researcher had ample opportunity to meet with the students on several occasions. Informal discussions would take place before and after class and during breaks, creating a trusting and open relationship between researcher and students. More casual conversations also revealed the interests and concerns of the students in a way that could not have been anticipated by the researcher. As a result, many issues which were not initially part of the interview guide were added later.

The group interview was used for many reasons. Frequently, women already formed a cohesive support group because of their minority status. The research could respect and build upon this fact. The group interview could contribute to these already existing groups by providing a forum for

reflection and learning as well as documentation and research. Finally, as a group women were far more likely to achieve hoped for improvements in their programs than they ever could alone.

The following is an example of how knowledge was socially produced by the women in this study:

J: I was talking to Marissa recently, I walked home with her yesterday and she said that she had wished this was an all women's program. When I signed up, I was under the impression that this was an all women's program. I remember when I came for the test, I was surprised cause I thought this was an all women's program. And I saw all these men (laugh) in the room. I thought, "I'm in the wrong room."

N: I thought the same thing. I walked in and I said, "Oh, I'm, my god."

C: Why did you think it was an all women's program?

J: Cause I read about it in the paper, The *New York Times*, and it was all about women in the field.

N: Um Hum.

J: They were talking about these women and this one has a loft and all about her life as a super, she was making this great salary and I said, "This sounds good." I thought, "This is thrilling. This is what I want." (laugh) But, you know, I have mixed feelings about it. I've enjoyed being in mixed company. But I think it would have been easier if it was all women.

N: It would've been easier. But I think we learned something from dealing with them (the men).

J: We have to deal with them out there.

N: We have to deal with them out there, so...

Without the suggestion made by Marissa that she would have preferred an all women's program, its possible that the concept might not have been considered by the group. However, after thoughtful debate, they concluded that an all women's program might have been easier and perhaps more comfortable, but that the co-ed program was preparing them for the reality of the work world.

The principle that collective methods are more likely to lead to collective action was borne out by this project. At the end of the last interview session, students asked for help in developing a strategy to make the program more sensitive to the needs of the women. They decided to write the Dean to request a meeting. In their letter they listed complaints as well as suggestions. These came directly from their group discussions. Finally, they volunteered to serve as peer advisers for women in future programs.

* * *

As the above examples demonstrate, group interviews become appropriate tools of research, once we emerge from the individualistic paradigm and understand knowledge as socially produced. The group interview is of value to researchers because it:

☐ approximates real life, a community of peers, a microcosm of social reality,

☐ allows group members to discover new or hidden meanings,

☐ provides opportunities for learning, as well as "knowledge-production," and

☐ significantly improves the likelihood that the group will act on the basis of its knowledge.

The group interview fulfills three functions critical to the "social construction of reality."

☐ It is participatory, i.e. the group becomes a co-researcher in social inquiry.

☐ It is heuristic, i.e. it leads to and exemplifies experimentation.

☐ It is illuminative: i.e. through it, social meanings are created and our knowledge of ourselves deepened.

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